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TAJIKISTAN

Community Focuses on Education

A school is transformed into a buoyant community center and a model for education reform in a remote Tajik village.



Children at school #22 in Yazgulum enjoy interactive lessons.

Photo: Carina Omoeva, USAID

“Everything we are proud of today came with the support of the USAID Improving Basic Education in Tajikistan project.”

Odinasho Mardov, the director of the school #22 in a remote Yazgulum village, Gorno Badakhshan Oblast.

Challenge

Situated in a narrow valley among the rocky mountains of Pamir, the village of Yazgulum, Gorno Badakhshan Oblast had been one of the hotbeds of the 1992-1997 civil war in Tajikistan. And even though the war ended years ago, Yazgulum's inhabitants were still afraid of the militants that continued to wander around the village. “Safety was the main concern. I didn't have high hopes that this place would ever improve”, says Yazgulum's resident Khafiz Azoraev. Education was not a priority for this community.

Initiative

In 2003, USAID's Improving Basic Education in Tajikistan (IBET) project, implemented by the Aga Khan Foundation, selected Yazgulum's school #22 as one of the 18 core schools to receive assistance in the Oblast. With 279 students in grades from 1-11 and 20 teachers, Yazgulum's school #22 was to become a model and resource center for education improvement for other schools in the area. USAID's project provided teacher and administrator training, books and teaching materials for creating a Learning Resource Center, assistance in community mobilization and parent involvement, and a small grant for classroom repairs. Teachers were taught to build lessons around their students, to promote critical thinking, analysis, self-assessment, self-reflection, and teamwork. Rearranging desks in clusters instead of rows, letting children talk while solving a problem, using visual teaching aids, and making sure everyone stayed engaged in their group, rather than individual, assignments – those were just a few of the changes that had to take place in the classroom.

Results

Three years into the cooperation with USAID's project, Yazgulum's school #22 has transformed into a buoyant community center. “It's completely different now,” says Khafiz Azoraev, the chairman of the Parent-Teacher Association. Step by step, teachers and students came to appreciate the learning process and value the time spent in class. While the project initially focused on primary teachers, soon all teachers in the school wanted to use the new techniques. Parent-teacher meetings transformed into an enthusiastic partnership aimed at quality improvement. Following the project's advice, they established a Non-Budget Fund, which accumulates community contributions that are used for school development needs. The school is the first in the entire district to have designed a 5-year School Development Strategy. And most importantly, the school hasn't had grade repetitions in three years and for the first time, its graduates entered universities last year.